

Let's animate: Reflections on a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning funded project

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Abstract

This paper describes and reflects on a project that introduced animation into assessment for undergraduate students.

Introduction and background

In this article, I reflect on the introduction of animation as a form of assessment for under-graduate students. As a Senior Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, I teach on BA (Hons) Social Care. The programme's key points of focus are a sound theoretical grounding in social care, and the inclusion of a myriad of disciplines including social policy, sociology, psychology and health. There is a strong emphasis on employability and the preparation of students for employment in the social care sector. One of my responsibilities is leading a core Level 5 unit (90 students) that is now called Engaging Communities, Delivering Services. I rewrote the unit in 2015, including a new assessment strategy. The aim of the unit is to explore the delivery of social care in communities and how organisations engage with communities; the unit builds on the knowledge, skills and understanding of communities gained at Level 4. Prior to 2015, students were assessed by an assignment and a group power-point presentation. In preparing for an open day presentation for potential students and their relatives, I came across a number of animations about social care practice online. With this in mind, I started to look at how animations were made, and spoke to the departmental e-learning officer, Hayley Atkinson about the options for introducing animations into my learning and teaching. At this point, I saw a call from the University's Centre for Learning and Teaching for applications for a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Funding was available to support research and scholarly work to improve quality in learning and teaching, including the

piloting of new approaches. The funding would enable us to purchase a departmental license for an online animation programme, attend workshops and conferences to disseminate findings, and some release from other teaching to develop the project. The application for funding was successful. In designing the SoTL project, I aligned the aims with the University's principles for Learning, Teaching and Assessment, as follows:

1. To explore the use of animation in student assessment and learning, as an alternative form of presentation.
2. To enable students to become partners in the co-production of learning materials for other students.
3. To collaborate with voluntary and community partners in providing animated videos for their organisations.

Assessment and animation – a brief summary from the literature

Throughout the project, we continued to inform our practice through the academic literature. There is not space here to provide a full review of all the relevant literature, but here we provide an overview. Assessment continues to be one of the most significant factors in learning and teaching in Higher Education (Brown and Knight, 1994; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Williams, 2014). Assessment of learning is the dominant form in contrast to assessment for learning, where students are assessed through a range of approaches that are of value for their future employability and learning (Williams, 2014). Biggs and Tang (2011:228) advocate assessing students' creativity as "the ability to create something different on a foundation of the unknown", using open-ended approaches and encouraging risk-taking.

The 2015 NMC Horizons Report identified that education technology will have a significant impact globally on higher education over the next few years and there is a need to increase students' digital literacy linked with employability (NMC, 2015). Creating animations improves students' digital literacy and they can be an effective tool in learning and teaching (Lam and McNaught, 2006). Many high quality multimedia materials are available online. There is, however, limited academic research and writing on the use of animations in learning

and teaching, and the research that exists mainly relates to science, computing and mathematics. Hoban (2009) asserts that students benefit from creating and designing artefacts for audiences. Herrington et al. (2010) who advocate learning in authentic environments, while Gauntlett (2011) whose book 'Making is Connecting' recognizes the intersecting value of digital learning, creativity and communities., and Meyer (2014:1) who states that 'People can learn more deeply from words and pictures than from words alone.'

Description of practice

Having been awarded the CELT SoTL funding, the next step was to identify an animation programme for the students to use that was free for students and could be used on any computer. Colleagues introduced me to me to Explee, stop motion animation and other programmes. I was already aware of Powtoon and Go-animate and spent time exploring these. We took the decision to use Go-Animate as I found it the most accessible, and used some funding to buy a licence for the schools programme. The costs are relatively low, and the technology allows for export of the animations to YouTube.

The unit specification for the Level 5 unit stated that the assessment would be a power-point presentation, so I needed to apply for a minor modification to change this to presentation. This was accepted. I had been teaching the unit for two years, and continued to teach the same topics (albeit updated in line with policy changes). Students attended a weekly seminar with a tutor and in these sessions, we showed them how to create animations, storyboarding techniques, and provided ongoing support. The Go-animate licence enabled us to give each student an account so that they could develop animations. The animations were to be 2-3 minutes long, consider a community, a social care organisation and the work the social care organisation did with those who used their services. Students worked in groups of 3-5.

We followed an action research approach: 'any research into practice undertaken by those involved in that practice, with an aim to change and improve it' (Open University, 2005:4). We undertook formal and informal evaluations of the students' experiences of making

animations. After each seminar, students were asked to provide verbal and visual feedback on how they felt the session had gone and their learning. We reflected on our own experiences of the seminars and contact from students. Following marking of the assessment and feedback, students were asked to complete an online questionnaire about their experiences of using animation, with an opportunity for free text comments.

Discussion

Generally, the project worked well and the informal and formal feedback from students was positive. Students told us:

'I think this animation is a fantastic idea and with out it I wouldn't have passed the module I am normally not a very academic student and having dyslexia struggle to do essays this animation allowed me to show my creative side and I would definitely recommend this you carry on with this type of assessment.'

'This animation was a lot more enjoyable than an essay or a presentation.'

'Maybe make the length of the animation more flexible'

'...maybe the groups could be smaller next year, so there's more for each person to do'

In undertaking the evaluation, students were willing to complete an online questionnaire, but reluctant to take part in an interview or a focus group citing time constraints and the fact that they had left the university for the academic year.

In reflecting on the project, I return to the key aims. We did explore the use of animation, and in conjunction with students found it to be a successful alternative to power-points, that was enjoyable. The students have co-produced learning materials for other students, and this academic year, we are using the animations to provide examples for level 5 students, and as resources for Level 4 students on another community based unit. Collaboration with voluntary and community partners was more challenging, mainly due to work pressures upon the organisations. However, some animations are being used by

organisations as promotional material. There were some key learning points for myself.

Group work was a challenge and I agree with Biggs and Tang (2010) that we need to approach group work with caution. The majority of students chose their groups, but there were students who for one reason or another, did not inform us of their groups so were randomly allocated. Using multiple student accounts was problematic for some students, and a few felt that two to three minutes was no long enough for an animation. I could have spent more time discussing the introduction of and rationale for the animations with colleagues.

Unintended outcomes

While teaching myself how to make an animation, I decided to make a fun animation for a friend of mine to play at a celebration event. I showed it to Dr Katherine Runswick-Cole (Social Change and Well-being Research Group) who asked me to introduce her to the basics of animating. By that evening she had made ten animations about the impact and outcomes of an ESRC funded research grant. And so it continued, as social media and word of mouth about the animations did their work. I have run a number of workshops for university colleagues on animation and those who attended have gone on to use animations in their community-based work and to disseminate research findings. One external partner emailed me to say '*Fantastic! Thank YOU so much.*' An academic colleague used animations at a workshop and told me in an email 'I felt that the application of GoAnimate in this instance, stimulated much discussion around both material and discursive issues pertaining to psychological practice. I hope to develop my skills in using it as a training tool.' (personal comm. academic colleague)

In the academy, we are cognisant of demonstrating the impact of our research, and short animations can reach those who may not have the capacity or time to read lengthy reports. Through the animation project I have met and connected with people who I do not come into contact with in my everyday role. These individuals work in other disciplines, departments, universities, and my learning, teaching and research practice continues to be informed by their work. I was asked to collaborate on the LTHE tweetchats between September and

December 2015, and was a guest on one of these tweetchats asking questions about the use of animation.

We have presented our experiences of introducing animation as assessment at conferences including the Assessment in Higher Education 2015 conference, the Association for Learning and Teaching conference 2015, the CELT conference 2015, the Faculty of Health, Psychology and Social Change Learning and Teaching conference 2015, and co-facilitated a creative workshop at Open Educa Berlin 2015.

Final thoughts

I am now teaching the second term of the unit, a year after we introduced animation as assessment for the students. I am hopeful that all the good practice that I have developed and the lessons from the evaluation will inform the learning and teaching in the unit. There are a number of key ways in which I have modified the teaching and assessment, and I am working with two new team members. We have asked the students to focus on their choice of community and organisations much earlier in the term, spent less time showing students how to do animations in recognising that they do not always need this support, and more time thinking about the content and how this will match the assignment specification. Each group has been provided with one student account. We have introduced a group diary to detail meetings and action points, and students are engaging more with the seminar time. Reflecting on my practice, I am more confident in talking to students about the value of making animations, and the re-development of a rubric is informing our assessment.

Being awarded the CELT scholarship funding has opened many new doors for me, and I have made new friends, as well as gained confidence as a teacher. Being creative and stepping out of the box can be a challenge in the academy, but I will continue to be creative and innovative in my practice, and would recommend that others do as well. However, you cannot do this on your own and as Nerantzi (2015: 23) reminds us 'We need to remember that people can bring spaces alive and bring others in'. As I write this article, I have been asked by a colleague if she can sit in on the seminars to learn how to animate, and our Faculty Business Development Manager has told

me that the Centre for Knowledge Exchange is making animations inspired by mine. Animation is enjoyable for students and staff, and through sharing practice of creative forms of assessment, the role of animations in learning and teaching can develop across the university.

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